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The Diversification of Agriculture in Italy: Agritourism and Organic Management

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Abstract

During the last 70 years, since the end of WW II, Italian agriculture has increased its productivity but, despite the national and European financial support to the primary sector, millions of farms have closed their operations, millions of hectares have been abandoned, and millions of farmers have emigrated to towns and abroad. Rural desertification has been aggravated by the closures of public offices and private businesses. Against this grim scenario, this paper illustrates, with the most recent available data, the evolution and growth of two sub-sectors, organic farming and agritourism. Both sub-sectors were initially contrasted and the first farmers adopting these strategies have encountered problems and obstacles, they were fined, and sometimes had to close their operations. In both cases, the pioneers resisted, organized themselves, and—thanks also to the support of consumers and some scientists, were able to lobby local, national, and European law makers for appropriate legislation. The first part of the article contains the data about the evolution and distribution of agritourism and organic farms, while the second part compares several aspects of the two sub-sectors.

Keywords

common agricultural policy, sustainable development, farm management, resilience

1. Introduction

Italian agriculture, when valued according to the traditional methods of national accounting, nowadays represents only a minor share of the Added Value produced in the country, slightly above two percent, and employs less than four percent of the total labour force (CREA, 2019). Its importance remains however relevant, because the primary products coming from the fields, pastures and stables generate complex value chains producing jobs and income, partially on-farm and mainly off-farm, but it is evident that new activities must be found to ensure the survival of the farming sector and of many rural areas.

As a matter of fact, since the end of World War II, Italian agriculture has continued to lose both farms and workforce. Total output and productivity have increased (Fanfani, 1988), but the farmers' income has deteriorated, and the "agricultural exodus" does not stop. In the first two decades of the 3rd Millennium, the number of farms has declined by almost 31 percent (Table 1), while the total workforce employed in the fields and in the stables has lost 250 thousand units, -22.3 percent.

Table 1. Evolution of Farms in Italy

Items	2000	2018	Δ% 2000-18
Total farms, n	1,049,890	726,261	-30.8
Farms with agritourism, n	9,314	23,615	153.5
- beds, n	110,000	262,659	138.8
Organic farms, n	51,120	69,317	35.6
- with some processing, n	1,330	10,363	679.2
- with some processing, %	2.6	15.0	
Area under conversion and organic, ha	1,040,377	1,958,045	88.2

Sources: Movimprese, 2020; CREA, 2019, SINAB, 2020.

Since 1996 (The Cork Declaration, 1996), it was understood, at least in Europe, that farmers cannot continue to practice agriculture within the present paradigm, producing poorly paid undifferentiated commodities. Only the diversification of the on-farm activities can offer sustainable new opportunities for the individual farmers, their families, and for the rural communities. This process is not easy and will not be accepted by all stakeholders, but it is unavoidable. Statistics are clear. Despite the huge transfer of financial resources, made possible by the national and European interventions, the conventional forms of industrial agriculture are suffering.

Rural areas, especially on the marginal territories, have witnessed a continuous decrease of their residents, accompanied by the closure of public services (schools, health posts, post offices) and of private businesses (grocery shops, coffee bars, banks, gas stations, mechanics, etc.). The Catholic Church too, in many parts of the country, has reduced its activities. The social desertification is evident and certified by the population censuses.

Within this dramatic scenario, there have been two components of the agribusiness that have shown vitality and positive results: agritourism and organic farming, frequently coexisting in the same farm.

This paper will describe, in comparative terms, the recent evolution of these two sub-sectors and will analyse the reasons explaining their vitality and relevance for Italy. The conclusions, however, are meaningful for most Countries, where the conventional type of modern agriculture is showing all its contradictions.

2. Method

This paper is based on the most recent available data, which have been found in different public databases (Movimprese, SINAB, CREA), in publications and in unpublished documents, most of which are in Italian language. Qualitative information has been provided by experts of the organic value chain and by experts of agritourism, who work within public bodies, local organizations, public research centres, and universities.

3. Result

Agritourism in Italy has a long and multifaceted history (Oho & Ciani, 2012; Santucci, 2013). Various types of accommodations are offered in Italy by almost 24,000 controlled producers, the 3.2 percent of the total Italian farmers, a 151.3 percent increase when compared to year 2000 (Table 1). The number of beds presently available in these farms has grown to 262,659 (+138.8%). Furthermore, there are 11,000 on-farm camping sites for visitors coming with their campers / *roulottes* or tents. Most agritourism farms also have a restaurant, for a total of 462,000 seats (Fratto et al., 2019).

Table 2. Distribution of Farms in 2018, by Regions

Regions	Total farms		Agritourism		Organic farms	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Piemonte	51,147	7.0	1,316	5.6	2,517	3.6
Valle d'Aosta	1,422	0.2	60	0.3	78	0.1
Lombardia	45,061	6.2	1,673	7.1	1,989	2.9
Liguria	9,358	1.3	656	2.8	323	0.5
Trentino-Alto Adige	27,893	3.8	3,648	15.4	2,912	4.2
Veneto	63,607	8.8	1,456	6.2	2,486	3.6
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	13,037	1.8	670	2.8	825	1.2
Emilia-Romagna	54,553	7.5	1,166	4.9	4,803	6.9
Toscana	38,377	5.3	4,620	19.6	4,527	6.5
Umbria	16,344	2.3	1,402	5.9	1,767	2.5
Marche	26,007	3.6	1,082	4.6	2,647	3.8
Lazio	42,564	5.9	1,278	5.4	4,241	6.1
Abruzzo	26,262	3.6	565	2.4	1,716	2.5
Molise	9,951	1.4	128	0.5	432	0.6
Campania	60,838	8.4	705	3.0	5,469	7.9

Puglia	77,766	10.7	876	3.7	8,485	12.2
Basilicata	18,140	2.5	187	0.8	2,166	3.1
Calabria	31,186	4.3	589	2.5	10,712	15.5
Sicilia	79,087	10.9	737	3.1	9,763	14.1
Sardegna	33,661	4.6	801	3.4	1,869	2.7
Italia	726,261	100.0	23,615	100.0	69,317	100.0

Sources: Movimprese, 2020; CREA, 2019, SINAB, 2020.

The clients can also enjoy a variety of other services: swimming pools, horse riding, guided tours, cooking classes, yoga courses, wine tasting, etc. There are no limits to phantasy. Wine tourism (Asero & Patti, 2009) represents a special segment, where wine producers join their energies with others, also with non-farmers operators, to attract visitors along “wine routes” promoted worldwide.

Agritourism is practiced in all 20 Italian regions (Table 2), with the highest numbers in Trentino-Alto Adige and in Tuscany. Trentino-Alto Adige (in German Sud Tyrol) is located at the North-Eastern border with Austria, on the Alps, has an historical tradition of on-farm hospitality and enjoys a “double season”, with alpine sports during the winter and climbing, hiking, riding during the summer. Most of its population is bilingual, so German speaking foreign tourists have been a constant.

The case of Toscana—Tuscany in English, is different: it offers some beautiful historical towns (Florence, Siena, Pisa, Lucca, Pistoia, etc.) and hundreds of smaller attractive villages, seaside beaches for summer tourism, mountains, and an incredible countryside, famous for its landscapes, wines, olive oils, cheeses, and gourmet products. Cultural tourism and food tourism propose synergies and attract visitors from all over the world. The vineyard area of Chianti has so many English tourists and residents to have been renamed “Chiantishire”.

Farms with agritourism facilities represent 13.1 percent of total in Trentino Alto-Adige and 12.0 percent in Tuscany, with another region, Umbria, the “Green Heart of Italy”, ranking third, with 8.6 percent of farmers accepting tourists in their farms (Table 3).

All Italian regions, on the mainland and on the many islands, have now much to offer and agritourism farms can be found everywhere. Natural beauties, historical and cultural attractions are scattered everywhere in Italy, all small towns and villages have an ancient church, a castle, several ancient palaces, archaeological sites, so tourists come to the rural areas not only for enjoying the silence and peacefulness of the countryside, but also to visit the attractions in the proximity.

Organic farming is practiced nowadays in Italy by almost 70,000 certified producers (Table 1), out of which 10,363, the 15 percent, have some sorts of on-farm processing and add value to their raw output (ISMEA-CIHEAM, 2019). It extends nowadays on almost two million hectares.

Organic agriculture was—and still is—often indicated as an Italian success story (Santucci & Pignataro, 2002; Defrancesco & Rossetto, 2007; Viganò, 2013; Gamboni & Moscatelli, 2015), because all socio-economic indicators (average size, age and education of farmers, turnover, marketing strategies, income, employment) are much better than those of the whole Italian agriculture.

In the period 2000-2018, the number of organic producers has grown by 35.6 percent, now representing 9.5 percent of the total Italian farmers.

On-farm processing has increased enormously and ensures employment and income to family members and employees. The sale of products does not take place only at the on-farm shop or at the local open markets, but thanks to internet and on-line payments the organic products are sold to consumers in distant towns and even abroad. Furthermore, the organic farmers are the first stakeholders of a complex system of off-farm processing units, that then provide all sorts of products to hundreds of restaurants, retailers, grocery stores and catering firms.

The highest number of organic farmers can be found in some Southern regions (Table 2). Three large regions, namely Calabria, Sicilia, and Puglia combined, have almost 42% of all organic farms in Italy: respectively 15.5, 14.1 and 12.2 percent of the total.

More interesting is the relevance of organic agriculture, the share of organic farms compared to all farms: the Italian figure is 9.5 per cent (Table 3). Every ten Italian farmers, almost one is now a certified organic producer. The region where organic agriculture has highest relevance is Calabria, famous for its olive oil, citrus fruits, wines, and veggies, followed at distance by several other regions, which show a 10-12 percent of organic producers on total operating farms.

Table 3. Relative Importance in 2018, by Regions

Regions	Agritourism/total	Organic/total
	%	%
Piemonte	2.6	4.9
Valle d'Aosta	4.2	5.5
Lombardia	3.7	4.4
Liguria	7.0	3.5
Trentino-Alto Adige	13.1	10.4
Veneto	2.3	3.9
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	5.1	6.3
Emilia-Romagna	2.1	8.8
Toscana	12.0	11.8
Umbria	8.6	10.8
Marche	4.2	10.2
Lazio	3.0	10.0
Abruzzo	2.2	6.5
Molise	1.3	4.3

Campania	1.2	9.0
Puglia	1.1	10.9
Basilicata	1.0	11.9
Calabria	1.9	34.3
Sicilia	0.9	12.3
Sardegna	2.4	5.6
Italia	3.3	9.5

Sources: Movimprese, 2020; CREA, 2019, SINAB, 2020.

Quite frequently, the organic option and the offer of hospitality coexist in the same farm, where organic products and meals are offered to clients. Some other aspects of sustainability are thus considered, to meet the requirements of the most environmentally conscious clients: energy is provided with solar cells and wind generators, water is managed with saving devices and is recycled after use, tablecloths, and bed linen are made with organic materials, etc. This development has been in good part market driven, thanks to the increasing demand for organic food and for alternative, sustainable approaches to tourism, but the public intervention should not be underestimated (Giaccio et al., 2018). Table 4 shows the normative framework that establish rules and conditions for the recognition of organic and agritourism farms.

Table 4. Norms and regulations

Items	Agritourism	Organic
EU Regulations	no	since 1991
National laws	since 1985	yes
Regional laws	yes	yes
Certification	very partial	yes
Sanitary controls	yes	yes
Wine Roads, Tutorial farms, Social farms		
- National law	yes	
- Regional laws	yes	

The Italian national law shaping the framework for agritourism was issued in 1985, with all regional governments producing their own adaptations, which are then updated and fine-tuned to meet new problems and opportunities. Strange to say, in this case the European Union has remained absent, without producing any own Regulation. The safety of the Italian agritourism operations is verified by different public bodies: the Municipalities issuing permits and authorizations, the local Health

Authorities, and the NAS, a specialised branch of the Carabinieri, a national police body, that looks after hygiene and safety of foods. Third party certification is not yet common, but there is a hypothesis for a nation–wide quality system, which should be agreed by all regional governments. In the meantime, some regions have already issued their systems, to classify agritourism farms according with different criteria. Tuscany, for example, considers several aspects of rurality, agricultural management, quality of hospitality, human resources, etc., and classifies the agritourism farms into three different classes, recognizable thanks to a logo showing from one to three ears.

Another type of voluntary certification is issued by ICEA, a large private certification body focusing on organic management, that certifies the environmental qualities of the agritourism. This system considers variables grouped within five areas: safeguard of environment and local resources, ecological management, promotion of local culture, utilization of organic foods, and sustainable transport system. The organic agritourism farms are thus classified into five classes, recognizable with a logo containing from one to five suns.

The Italian experience is then enriched by the many successful farms and by the legislation about Wine and Food Roads (Cinelli Colombini, 2015), Tutorial (or Didactic) farms—mainly for kids (Moruzzo et al., 2020)—and by the Social farms (Ronchetti et al., 2011), these latter ones mainly devoted to the social inclusion of people with handicaps, to the rehabilitation of drug addicts and the inclusion of migrants.

In the case of organic farming, the history is different (Santucci, 2012). Until the 1980's, the situation was a bit chaotic. In absence of a national or European definition, some regional Governments had begun to issue their own legislation, but the utilization itself of the word "organic" or "biological" was contested and there were several interventions by the judiciary. In some cases, the first organic producers were challenged in courts, were fined and some activities were even closed. Finally, the EU first regulation about organic farming was produced in 1991 and has been continuously updated (Table 4). Thanks to this European initiative, the existence of organic producers, processors and traders has been legalized. Presently, all Italian regions have their own laws, implementing the EU norms, and the legal problems belong to the past.

The existence of legislation defining agritourism and organic farming has allowed the allocation of important economic resources (Table 5), within the recent and present Common Agricultural Policy of the European Union, and thanks to own resources of the Italian national and regional Governments. Since 1994, the largest financial amount transferred to organic farmers, in Italy as well as all over the European Union, falls in the category of "decoupled area subsidies", an annual payment given to the primary producers who apply the organic methods of cultivation and animal productions.

Table 5. Economic Support

Typology	Agritourism	Organic
Decoupled annual subsidies	no	Yes, since 1994
Grants for investments	yes	yes
Grants for promotion	yes	yes
Grants for associations	yes	yes
Grants for research	no	yes

These subsidies are calculated per hectare (or acre) of land, and the amounts depend on the land use (cereals, pastures, orchards, vineyards, etc.) or on the number of heads, without considering the quantity of the output produced. The amounts are calculated by groups of experts, in collaboration with representatives of the farmers, and are decided at regional level. This direct income support is given for the period of conversion and then for the maintenance of the organic methods. Much has been written about this type of subsidy, and about other types of support, all of which have pros and cons, supporters, and opponents (Lampkin et al., 1999; Schwartz et al. 2010; Sanders et al., 2011, Abitabile & Viganò, 2012). Organic farmers applying for the direct income support are subject to certification by one of the several private Certification Bodies recognized by the Italian Ministry of Agriculture and accredited to exercise this task. The Certification Bodies send inspectors and analyse farming systems, soils, and products to verify the respects of the organic methods.

Within the European Union's policy for rural development, both sectors, agritourism and organic farming, had the possibility to receive, after approved projects, grants for investments, which have been used for modernizing buildings and to purchase field machinery and on-farm processing facilities. Promotional activities have been financed to explore new markets, via participation in national and international fairs, to organize events for buyers and importers, to print and distribute leaflets and other information materials in several languages, and more recently to activate and update websites. Most of the promotional activities have been financed to National and local associations, more rarely to the individual farmer. Other grants have been given, through European projects, for the improvement of human resources, thanks to projects co-financed by the European Social Fund. In the organic sector, much applied research has been financed, mainly to improve quality and productivity of crops and animals, with funds coming from the European Union (Horizon, 2020, for example, or the Rural Development Plans) or from the Italian Ministry of Agriculture. Other grants have been allocated to support the establishment and functioning of Associations, which favour the aggregation of the supply and the qualitative improvement of the products, including material outputs and agritourism services.

As a matter of fact, in both sub-sectors, agritourism and organic production, the farmers have felt the need to aggregate and work together (Table 6), first to exercise a pressure on the law makers, at local and national level, to access the various types of grants seen before, and then to market together their produces.

Table 6. Social Capital, Dates of Foundation

Associations	Agritourism	Organic
Terra nostra (CD)	1973	
Agritourist (CONFAGRI)	1975	
Anagritour (national umbrella)	1980	
Turismo Verde (CIA)	1981	
Associazione biodinamica		1947
Suolo e Salute		1969
Commissione Nazionale Cos'è Biologico		1985
AIAB - Associazione Italiana Agricoltura Bio		1988
FEDERBIO		1992 - 2005
AssoBio		2006
Organic associations within traditional Farmers' Unions		yes

The first national association for the promotion of agritourism was Terra Nostra (*Our Land*), established in 1973 within the national Farmers' Union Coldiretti (CD), that traditionally included a large membership of mainly small and catholic family farmers. Two years later, Agritourist was established by another national Union, CONFAGRI, whose associates are less numerous but have much larger farms, managed with employed workers. Finally, in 1981 Turismo Verde (*Green Tourism*) was founded, within the Confederation of Italian Agriculturalists (CIA), a numerically large union, whose members are mainly small and politically oriented to the left. The main achievement of these associations has been the national law in 1985 (and its periodical adaptations), that defines agritourism an "agricultural activity", with a special administrative and fiscal status, and the other national and regional laws seen before (Table 4).

Even more important has been the social capital (Santucci, 2012) for the recognition and development of organic agriculture, that has a longer history than agritourism, but was contrasted for several decades by the scientific world and by the three conventional Unions mentioned before. The very first organic producers were a sort of pioneers, outsiders, very alternative, often without links with the surrounding conventional farmers. Many were of urban origins and several were foreigners. They had to establish links among themselves, to survive, exchange information and sell their products. As a matter of fact, the first grassroot association for the promotion of organic agriculture was established in Milano, Northern Italy, just after the end of World War II, in 1947, by a tiny group of consumers, medical doctors, agricultural technicians and a few producers, all followers of the teachings of Rudolph Steiner, the founder of Anthroposophy, whose followers had developed the Biodynamic Agriculture. A second association "*Soil and Health*" was established in 1969, by a similarly small group of people, who adopted norms and techniques from the organic French movement.

Informal groups and movements continued to flourish all over Italy, and finally a national coordination body, the National Committee "*What is organic*" was set up in 1985. Only three years later, the "*Italian Association for Organic (Biological) Agriculture*" was established, to support the now fast expansion of the organic sub-sector, that was finally legalized with a European Regulation in 1991. It is important to underline that all these groups, associations, and movements for many years were totally self-financed and had to contrast the opposition from the conventional Unions. Only after 1991, the conventional Unions have "accepted" the existence of organic methods and have tried to recuperate the delay with the establishment of organic sections within their organizations. Finally, it is worth mentioning the existence of AssoBio, previously known as FEDERBIO, that groups together processing firms, importers, traders, and retailers, all post-farmgate stakeholders, which nowadays play an important role vis-à-vis the national Government and the European Union.

4. Discussion

Within the general scenario of the continuous decline in the number of conventional farmers and farms, agritourism activities and organic management are the only options which have generated an inversion of both trends. This has initially happened in the most difficult and marginal areas, where a relatively younger generation of farmers, sometimes coming from an urban background, has revitalized abandoned farms and villages, and used again abandoned pastures and fields (van der Ploeg, 2009; Milone, 2009). Their presence has had a multiplying effect, with a positive fallout on all other economic sectors. Table 7 proposes a synoptic view and a comparison of the positive impacts of these two new processes and products of agriculture.

Local genetic resources have been greatly valorised by the organic farmers, who have retrieved abandoned crops, ancient varieties, and local animal breeds, to enhance diversity and resilience (Smith et al., 2011). The same is not necessary in agritourism farms, but this has been done by most operators. Local traditional knowledge is very necessary for the agronomic aspects in organic farms and is also used by those agritourism farmers with restaurants, who decide to offer local recipes to their clients. In both cases, the diversification of activities grows, and consequently the technical and economic resilience of the farms increases. More varieties of the same crop, more crops in the fields, more on-farm processing, more marketing channels, diversified clientele. All these factors determine a higher demand of work (Jansen, 2000). that can be properly paid thanks to the increased added value. More family members, if they wish, can have an opportunity in the farm, with new knowledge and modern skills required: on farm processing, marketing, cooking, foreign languages, communication skills for visitors, internet, and social media. The role of women has improved and many farms, in both sub-sectors, are managed by women.

With higher frequency in agritourism activities, than in the organic ones, the quality-of-life increases (Jansen, 2000), thanks to the investments and improvements made to the estate and the buildings. Better roads, nicer surroundings, swimming pool, sauna, gym, air conditioning, fast internet connection, etc. are necessary for the clients, and are also available to family members and staff.

Table 7. Comparative Assessment of the Valorisation

Aspects	Agritourism	Organic farming
Estate (buildings)	xxxx	xx
Local genetic resources	xx	xxxx
Local traditional knowledge	xx	xxxx
Diversification	xxxx	xx
Resilience	xxxx	xx
Added value	xxxx	xx (on-farm processing)
Employment	xxxx	xxx
Quality of life	xxxx	xx
Self-esteem	xxxx	xxx
Development of territory	xxx	xx
Export	x	xx
Import	no	xx

Another important aspect concerns the farmers' psychological situation, since both job satisfaction and self-esteem increase (Mzoughi, 2014). After decades during which the farmers were the "losers", the laggards in the path toward economic and social development, as certified by the numbers of the agricultural and rural exodus, when the farmers were accused of poisoning the aquifers with their chemicals, and foreign foods were invading the Italian diet, the organic foods are nowadays celebrated as healthy and beneficial for the environment. Organic wines receive awards in international competitions. Agritourism farms receive hundreds of thousands of tourists, from Italy and abroad, who want to discover the beauties of countryside. Farmers are proud again of what they do, for the environment and for the society at large.

When the numbers of organic farms and agritourism farms raise, there is also a beneficial impact on the economic and demographic situation of the territory, first thanks to the activities linked in the value chain (input and service suppliers, off-farm processors, and traders), and then with the other businesses that can attract visitors and clients, in the nearby towns and villages of the area (Olivieri, 2014). Again, this means added value, jobs, and income, in rural areas that seemed destined to social desertification.

Obviously, whenever organic agriculture is practiced in the agritourism farm, the better of two worlds merges and all possible synergies are activated. For example, there are in Italy biodynamic farmers, followers of doctrine of Steiner, who are certified by ICEA and attract, from all over the world, followers of the anthroposophical movement, who wish to spend their holidays in a setting that ensures the respect of their belief. Another fast-growing segment of clients is represented by the vegetarian and vegan consumers, who look for organic agritourism facilities without animal products in their meals. This imposes other choices to the farmers, and also creates new opportunities. Both sub-sectors generate a positive flow of goods and external payments: organic Italian foods are exported all over the world and can be found in foreign countries, foreign tourists visiting Italy buy organic products from the farms they have visited and bring them back home. In the most recent years, Internet has generated an increasing volume and value of organic foods sold all over the world through e-commerce. This flow counterbalances the import of organic products from other European countries and from Third countries.

This progress, as described in this paper, has not happened in one day. The first organic farmers and consumers in Italy date back to the late 1940's and the first agritourism farms begun their operations in the 1970's. In both cases, these farmers were pioneers, who often had problems with the surrounding world and with the Institutions, because these activities were not yet regulated. Some consumers, feeble market forces, have initiated both movements, then the farmers have organized themselves, and were supported by some consumers and scientists, to push the policy makers for appropriate legislation. Once the regulatory frameworks were in place, the combined forces of the consumers' demand and of the public funds have favoured the huge expansion of both subsectors. This successful story has been possible thanks to the efforts of the private sector, the civil society, and the public Institutions (Santucci & Antonelli, 2004; Di Iacovo & O'Connor, 2009). The role of organic farming in the Europe Union is now well specified (European Commission, 2020). Further development is next to come, when the financial resources of the EU 2021-2027 Planning period and of the EU Next Generation Fund will be available.

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